

**BEFORE THE
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
PUBLIC SAFETY AND HOMELAND SECURITY BUREAU**

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| In the Matter of |) | |
| |) | |
| Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau |) | PS Docket No. 18-339 |
| Seeks Comment on Hurricane Michael Preparation |) | |
| and Response |) | |
| |) | |

GULF POWER COMPANY’S INITIAL COMMENTS

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December 17, 2018

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Gulf Power Company (“Gulf Power”) respectfully submits the following comments in response to the Commission’s November 16, 2018 Public Notice in the above referenced docket.¹

INTRODUCTION

Gulf Power is an investor-owned electric utility headquartered in Pensacola, Florida. Gulf Power serves approximately 462,000 customers in northwest Florida, including customers in Panama City, Florida and other areas of Bay County, Florida that were hardest-hit by Hurricane Michael on October 10, 2018. Gulf Power submits these comments to:

- Provide the Commission with a high-level understanding of Gulf Power’s service restoration efforts following Hurricane Michael; and
- Address Item #10 (regarding fiber cuts) in the Commission’s Public Notice.

I. Background

As the Commission correctly notes in the Public Notice, Hurricane Michael was the strongest storm to hit the Florida panhandle in recorded history and, moreover, was the strongest storm to hit the continental United States since Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Gulf Power—for better or worse—has seen its share of powerful hurricanes, including Opal (1995), Ivan (2004) and

¹ *Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau Seeks Comment on Hurricane Michael Preparation and Response*, Public Notice, DA 18-1176, PS Docket No. 18-339 (rel. Nov. 16, 2018) (“Public Notice”).

Dennis (2005) in recent history. Electric restoration after a storm of this magnitude is a grueling, complicated, labor-intensive, all-hands-on-deck affair. It not only involves nearly *every* employee of Gulf Power, but also involves marshalling and managing mutual assistance resources from across the country.

Hurricane Michael caused power outages for approximately 125,000 (more than 25%) of Gulf Power's electric service customers. More than 99,000 of the 125,000 outages were in Bay County alone. In addition to deploying virtually every Gulf Power employee to storm recovery duty, Gulf Power also called upon more than 5,800 personnel from across the country through its mutual assistance agreements. Many of these mutual assistance resources were pre-positioned prior to Hurricane Michael's landfall.

Within 24-hours after the storm, Gulf Power had restored electricity to 25,000 customers. Within 7 days after the storm, Gulf Power had restored electricity to roughly 80,000 customers. Within two weeks after the storm, Gulf Power had restored electricity to all customers who could safely receive electric service at their premises. In many respects, "rebuilding" is a more accurate way to describe Gulf Power's efforts; the restoration effort required replacement of 7,000 distribution poles and 200 miles of distribution lines. Though the damage was severe, the fact that only 25% of Gulf Power's customers lost power in a storm of this magnitude is a testament to the success of Gulf Power's infrastructure hardening initiatives over the past 12 years.

II. Public Notice Item #10

Item #10 in the Public Notice states:

News outlets and DIRS reported situations of fiber cuts during restoration. Even ten days after the storm hit, companies reported in DIRS that major fiber facilities were still out of service in Florida. Many communications providers reported having restored fiber links disabled by repair efforts from other entities, include [sic] power utilities. How often and when did these cuts occur? What

caused these fiber cuts? What steps, if any, did service providers take to minimize such cuts?

Public Notice, p.4. Because Gulf Power does not have access to or participate in DIRS, it is unaware of precisely what information was reported to the Commission by communications providers through DIRS. Nor is Gulf Power privy to the information reported to the Commission by communications providers through other means. The only entities that complained directly to Gulf Power about fiber cuts during the storm recovery were Uniti Fiber and its carrier customer, Verizon Wireless.

III. Uniti Fiber, Verizon Wireless and the Alleged Fiber Cuts

Uniti Fiber is an affiliate of Southern Light LLC, with whom Gulf Power has a pole license agreement. Under this pole license agreement, Uniti Fiber has approximately 10,000 attachments to Gulf Power's poles, 2,000 of which are within Gulf Power's Eastern District (comprised mostly of Bay County, Florida). For purposes of scale, Gulf Power has 199,000 third-party attachments on its distribution poles throughout its system (not including incumbent LECs with whom Gulf Power has joint use agreements). Approximately 66,000 of these attachments are within the Eastern District. In other words, Uniti Fiber represents approximately 3% of Gulf Power's third-party attachments in the area hardest-hit by Hurricane Michael.

Verizon Wireless, as Gulf Power learned in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Michael, relies primarily (if not exclusively) on Uniti Fiber for backhaul in Bay County, Florida. Within the first couple of days after the storm, it came to Gulf Power's attention that a Verizon Wireless governmental affairs representative was blaming Gulf Power in the media—and perhaps elsewhere—for service restoration delays. Shortly after that, it came to Gulf Power's attention that a Verizon Wireless network status screen inaccurately denoted "Gulf Power Cut Fiber" in

numerous locations where neither Uniti Fiber nor Verizon Wireless had actually investigated or verified the cause of the cut.

In one of the many coordination telephone conferences between Gulf Power, Uniti Fiber, Verizon Wireless and others, Gulf Power raised this issue with Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless. In addition to being inaccurate, this notation on the network status screen was inconsistent with the level of coordination and communication taking place between Uniti Fiber, Gulf Power and Verizon Wireless. In fact, in an October 21, 2018, conference call (one of the many coordination calls involving Gulf Power, Uniti Fiber, Verizon Wireless and others), a Uniti Fiber executive stated that, in two decades, he had never experienced the level of coordination with a large utility company like he was experiencing with Gulf Power. As of October 19, 2018, the inaccurate notation had been removed from Verizon Wireless' network status screen.

To Gulf Power's knowledge, Uniti Fiber and/or Verizon Wireless initially blamed approximately 30 fiber cuts on Gulf Power (including its contractors and mutual assistance crews). Gulf Power's own investigation revealed that no more than 4 of these alleged fiber cuts were attributable to Gulf Power (including its contractors and mutual assistance crews). Given the scope of damage from the storm, the fact that Gulf Power was responsible for no more than 4 of these fiber cuts is a testament to the level of care exercised by Gulf Power and its effectiveness in communicating best practices to the 5,800 mutual assistance personnel from across the country. The vast majority of the alleged fiber cuts likely were caused by road-clearing crews within the first 48 hours after the storm. In addition to the damage to Gulf Power's system, Hurricane Michael caused significant damage to homes, businesses, other structures, trees and vegetation. This left many roads impassable in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Among these 4 or fewer fiber cuts attributable to Gulf Power (including its contractors and mutual assistance crews) were instances in which (1) Uniti Fiber had attempted to repair its facilities prior to pole line repair/reconstruction and/or (2) Gulf Power's contractors were not engaged in electric restoration activities at the time of the cut.

One example is a cut to Uniti Fiber's backbone along U.S. Highway 98 in Panama City, on the morning of October 18, 2018. In this situation, an 18-wheel tractor-trailer was pulling into the parking lot from Highway 98 (the major east-west corridor through Panama City), and became entangled in Uniti Fiber's low-hanging line. Because of the entanglement, the tractor trailer was unable to move and created a significant traffic back-up on Highway 98. A contractor awaiting dispatch attempted to untangle the fiber from between the cab and the trailer in order to allow the truck to move. After multiple unsuccessful attempts to free the entangled fiber, the contractor cut the fiber in order to free the entangled truck. Notwithstanding that this fiber cut had nothing to do with electric service restoration work, and notwithstanding the fact that Uniti Fiber's own low-hanging line was a contributing factor, two Gulf Power employees went to the site immediately after the incident to provide support to Uniti Fiber and to dispatch contractors to re-install the fiber after the splice.

Another example is a fiber cut by a mutual assistance crew during the repair/reconstruction of a feeder in downtown Panama City, Florida (near Alternate Highway 98). As part of the repair/reconstruction, the crew needed to straighten a pole that was leaning due to storm damage. At the time the crew arrived, though, Uniti Fiber had already spliced its fiber in order to restore service, but had failed to provide sufficient fiber slack to allow the line crew to straighten the pole. In other words, the pole was "pinned" into its leaning, damaged position because of Uniti Fiber's work. The mutual assistance crew was required to cut the fiber on both sides of the pole in order

to complete the job. This was not a situation where the mutual assistance crew could have just removed the fiber and left it on the ground—the insufficient fiber slack eliminated all options other than cutting the fiber or ceasing the repair/reconstruction of the feeder.

In a perfect world, the crew could have stopped, contacted Uniti Fiber (assuming the fiber was marked as required by the pole license agreement), waited for a Uniti Fiber crew to arrive at the scene, and discussed a work-around, temporary splice or some other alternative. But storm restoration work is far from a perfect world. And communications attachers cannot reasonably expect that rushed restoration of their service on severely damaged electric infrastructure will, in every instance, remain intact when the infrastructure is repaired.

The example above is a perfect example of a situation that could have been avoided through properly sequenced restoration efforts. And it is one of the reasons Gulf Power delivered maps on a daily basis to Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless identifying feeders where repair/reconstruction work was complete. Had Uniti Fiber either coordinated its repair work with Gulf Power or repaired its line after pole line repair/reconstruction, this fiber cut never would have occurred.

IV. Gulf Power's Coordination Efforts

Even while undertaking its most challenging storm restoration effort *ever*, Gulf Power still communicated daily—at times hourly—with Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless. By the morning of Saturday, October 13, Gulf Power had deployed two employees to Panama City, Florida, specifically dedicated to coordinating with third-party communications attachers on restoration efforts: (1) A joint use and pole attachment specialist; and (2) a senior manager. As referenced above, these Gulf Power employees participated in daily telephone calls with Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless to discuss and coordinate restoration status efforts. Gulf Power also circulated written notice to each line crew (in English and Spanish) advising the crews **not** to cut fiber without first contacting Gulf Power's joint use and pole attachment specialist.

In an effort to further accommodate and support Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless during restoration efforts, Gulf Power:

- Offered Verizon Wireless temporary use of dark fiber owned by Gulf Power’s affiliate;
- Elevated priority for pole line restoration on a route critical to Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless (even though not high priority for Gulf Power);
- Delivered maps on a daily basis to Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless identifying feeders where repair/reconstruction work was complete (as referenced above), so that Uniti Fiber could perform its own work without conflict; and
- Provided contact information to Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless for governmental and utility personnel *outside* Gulf Power’s service area.

Gulf Power’s level of cooperation and coordination with Uniti Fiber and Verizon Wireless in the wake of Hurricane Michael is what makes the narrative regarding “power company fiber cuts” so troubling. This narrative is at odds with the *actual* experience on the ground. Even though Gulf Power was principally focused on restoring electric service, it also worked closely with third party communications attachers for the greater good of the communities impacted by the storm. The fact that “power companies” or a deficiency in “cooperation” are implicated as part of the problem—whether in the Public Notice or in various public statements by the Commissioners—is a disincentive to engage in this level of coordination the next time around.

V. Commission Action

The Public Notice seeks comment on what actions, if any, the Commission can take to facilitate communications network resiliency, storm readiness and disaster response. Gulf Power’s own experience with storms indicates that redundancy and hardening are two of the keys to improving resiliency, readiness and response. For example, neither Gulf Power nor the Florida Public Service Commission would consider it acceptable that a single fault could disable an entire network. And if a single fault could disable an entire network, it would be important to harden that line and to have mechanisms in-place for immediate response and repair. To that end, the

Commission might consider encouraging the type of redundancy, hardening and response mechanisms with respect to fiber networks that electric utilities are expected to employ in the normal course of operations. The Commission might also consider encouraging the pre-positioning of response resources, similar to Gulf Power's pre-positioning of resources referenced above.

Gulf Power also agrees that cooperation between local authorities, power companies and communications attachers is important. As it relates to power companies—and specifically investor-owned utilities—the Commission should consider whether and how its pole attachment policy is (1) facilitating or harming partnerships between electric utilities and communications attachers, (2) impairing or improving electric infrastructure resiliency (which is inextricably linked to communications infrastructure resiliency), and (3) incentivizing or disincentivizing strategic underground deployment of critical fiber backbone.

First, the Commission should consider how to facilitate partnerships and cooperation between electric utilities and communications attachers. The Commission's current policy has favored inexpensive, rapid deployment of communications facilities over the safety, reliability and equitable cost sharing of electric infrastructure. This one-sided approach, which interferes with electric distribution construction/maintenance practices and puts constant downward pressure on pole network cost recovery, does not promote partnership and cooperation between electric utilities and communications attachers. Similarly, rather than implicating power companies as part of the problem in communications restoration after Hurricane Michael, the Commission should be asking (1) why there were so few fiber cuts by electric utility restoration personnel, given the magnitude of the storm and (2) how to build on the success of the cooperative efforts in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Michael.

Second, the Commission should consider more carefully how its pole attachment policy impacts the electric grid and, in turn, how the impact to the electric grid contributes to the vulnerability of communications networks during and after events like Hurricane Michael. The Commission's recent pole attachment rulemaking orders, for example, are harming an electric utility's ability to properly engineer its infrastructure. The best example of this is the Commission's new rule regarding overlashing, which does not allow utilities "to require an overlasher to submit specifications of the materials to be overlashed."² Without these specifications, an electric utility's ability to evaluate the impact of a proposed overlashing is impaired, and the risk of overloading (particularly during wind events) is increased. Though the Commission's policy may expedite broadband deployment, it has a negative impact on the networks, particularly during events like Hurricane Michael. To put it more simply, speed in deployment is often inversely proportional to speed in restoration.

Third, the Commission should consider whether its current pole attachment policy discourages the hardening of communications facilities. The Commission's current policy has suppressed the cost of aerial fiber deployment to the point that a fiber company hardly ever opts for underground deployment where aerial deployment is an option. The cost disparity between aerial and underground deployment creates a disincentive for communications providers to strategically harden critical fiber backbone. When fiber is buried in accordance with the Common Ground Alliance Best Practices, it is not only protected from the storm itself, but also more protected from right-of-way disturbance during storm restoration efforts.

² Third Report and Order and Declaratory Ruling, FCC 18-111; *Accelerating Wireline Broadband Deployment by Removing Barriers to Infrastructure Investment* (WC Docket No. 17-84), ¶ 119 n. 444.

CONCLUSION

Gulf Power appreciates the opportunity to submit these initial comments in response to the Public Notice and looks forward to further dialogue with the Commission on these important issues.

Respectfully submitted this 17th day of December, 2018.

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